Points taken

Promotion-score 'cheat sites' abound: an open secret in the ranks

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An investigation at Fort Campbell, Ky., has exposed a longstanding vulnerability in the Army's promotion system, one in which thousands of enlisted soldiers may be illegally adding points to their worksheet scores.

Army officials said the investigation so far is limited to Fort Campbell, where a soldier with the 101st Airborne Division was counseled in connection with a Web site he ran, Shamschool.com.

Fort Campbell officials began the investigation on a tip.

The site bills itself as "soldiers helping soldiers," and much of the message traffic appears to be legitimate knowledge sharing. But soldiers also openly exchanged answers to Army Correspondence Course Program tests, enabling them to cheat then falsely claim points for successful completion on their promotion worksheets.

Shamschool.com is just one of numerous Web sites where soldiers can go to get copies of correspondence course tests and answers. Although the probe into the known case at Fort Campbell has ended, investigators there are asking additional questions that could lead to a wider look at a cheating problem the Army acknowledges is nothing new.

"It's like any investigation. If they find out it involves persons or actions that are outside the scope of this investigation, it could spill over and be passed up to the appropriate authority," division spokeswoman Lt. Col. Rumi Nielsen-Green told Army Times, adding, "It's far from over."

Soldiers up for sergeant and staff sergeant are scored on a promotion worksheet and earn points for everything from weapons qualifications to physical fitness test performance, decorations and education.

The latter category includes points for successful correspondence course completion. At any given time, there are 30,000 specialists, corporals and sergeants vying for promotion, according to Human Resources Command.

Senior NCOs have complained that the system not only is vulnerable to cheating, but is so loosely managed that it allows soldiers to take courses that are unrelated to their career field and do not contribute to their professional development.

> "There's just no discipline in the system."
>
> A COMMAND SERGEANT MAJOR

"There's just no discipline in the system," said a command sergeant major who requested anonymity.

"It's good that it promotes self-development, but an infantryman may be taking courses that have nothing to do with leadership and being an infantryman," he said.

A senior officer at the Pentagon said any allegations of cheating are taken seriously by the Army and will be looked at once Fort Campbell makes its final conclusions.

"Depending on the results of the AR 15-6 investigation and the recommendations that come from that, we would not rule out looking further," Army spokesman Col. Dan Baggio said. "But it's very, very premature at this time to speculate and jump to conclusions."

The Shamschool operator, Spc. Adam Chrysler, was counseled July 25 after a 15-6 investigation and early the next day posted the actual counseling form on his site with a note titled "R.I.P. Shamschool" next to a giant drawing of a crying rabbit.

"This counseling was strict and to the point," Chrysler, who works in the 159th Combat Aviation Brigade, said in his note. "I am sorry to have to disappoint you all, but I am following orders."

He declined to comment for this story, saying he had been ordered not to speak to the media about the case, first reported by The Boston Globe.

The counseling form from his company commander, whose name is blurred out in the online posting, identifies Chrysler as the webmaster of Shamschool.com, "which permits posting of ACCP exams complete with answers."

"Enabling soldiers to cheat on ACCP exams ... undermines the integrity of the Army," the commander said, ordering the tests and answers removed.

But Shamschool.com, which claims 10,000 members and 500,000 hits a day, is still active, and its discussion forum with soldiers sharing advice, experiences and support, continues as usual.

ARMY TIMES –6 August 2007 – pages 8-9

Discussions are wide ranging.

One soldier asked for advice on how to begin training for Special Forces selection; another said she was told by her chain of command she couldn't go before a board be-

cause she was pregnant, but her chain was wrong, as confirmed by a host of other soldiers, one of whom had been pregnant when she went before a board.

But the site's most popular feature, and the one that drew the investigation after a defense contractor and former noncommissioned officer alerted Army authorities in June, was the section where soldiers posted the answers to tests from the Army Correspondence Course Program.

During a browse on the site the day Chrysler was ordered to remove the answers, two messages popped up from soldiers seeking answers to specific ACCP exams.

Soldiers were sharing the answers to hundreds of ACCP tests in a free trade market, with a level of comfort that had some identifying themselves with their Army Knowledge Online addresses.

But the practice, according to discussion among soldiers, as well as Army officials in charge of online testing, is as old as the hills, and Shamschool.com is not alone.

"An important thing to remember is that ever since there have been tests, there has been cheating," said Col. Jim Markley, head of Army Distributed Learning Program, who recalled that as a new lieutenant assigned to Fort Campbell more than 20 years ago "there were paper tests passed around."

"Now," he said, "with the more automated way of testing, my end of the bargain is to try to stay one step ahead."

But that's no small task, according to a Shamschool.com moderator, who gave the Army credit for working to make it harder to cheat on the tests and said he counsels soldiers against cheating.

"The cheat sites are everywhere, they're all over the place," said Sgt. Micah Smith, one of seven moderators at Shamschool.com, which he described as a place soldiers can go to help each other with much more than tests.

"We've turned into the largest soldier Web site out there," Smith said, recalling being handed a three-ring binder eight years ago by an NCO at his first unit of assignment, which contained all the tests and answers to ACCP courses.

As computerized information became the norm, he explained, soldiers passed it around on compact discs and thumb drives. Smith said he has never cheated on a test.

At least 14 "cheat sites" are easily found on the Web, many claiming hundreds of members and advertising free file sharing for Army correspondence courses.

The proliferation of Web-based cheat sites underscores the challenge faced by the Army as it moves to make career opportunities for soldiers available online.

"This has been an ongoing problem over the years," Carol Washington, chief of Individual Training Support based at Fort Eustis, Va., said in an e-mail. "We report incidents where we find out about Web sites identified with test exams and answers to [Criminal Investigation Command]. However, often times it is difficult for them to prove that there was malicious intent."

The problem is not unique to the Army. The Marine Corps last year vigorously cracked down on widespread exam cheating.

The Army, Washington explained, is considering several options to try to stay one step ahead of a generation of soldiers who are skilled at maneuvering Web-based programs.

Randomized test questions, a larger pool of test items, timed exams or proctored exams are being looked at, she said, but with the rate of deployment among soldiers it would be unfair to burden

them with the responsibility of having to find an education center or other designated location.

The Army, she said, is transitioning to a more robust and potentially more secured Army Learning Management System, in which guidelines for testing could eliminate the use of instant messaging, e-mailing and printing test questions.

"In cases where persons are

found guilty of cheating, publicizing the consequence may make others think twice before they do this," she said.

"Whatever we implement as a deterrent, there is someone out there who figures out a way to circumvent the security measures that are in place," she said. □

Staff writer Jim Tice contributed to this report.

Correspondence courses: a legitimate way to gain points

By Jim Tice

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Since implementation of the current sergeant and staff sergeant promotion system in 2000, correspondence courses have provided a way for enterprising soldiers to boost their chances for advancement.

Correspondence courses, along with information technology courses offered through the Army e-Learning Program, can be used to earn points in the military education section of DA Form 3355, the promotion point worksheet.

That same section also awards credits for completion of two NCO Education System courses, the Warrior Leader Course (16 points) and Basic NCO Course (40 points), and functional courses, such as the Special Forces Qualification Course and Ranger Course. The latter courses generate four promotion points for every week of training.

Under a formula adjusted last year, and to be included in the revised enlisted promotion regulation that takes effect Aug. 1, soldiers are awarded one promotion point for every five hours of credits earned through the courses.

"For E-4s moving to E-5 and E-5s moving to E-6, there is a maximum of 1,000 credit hours that can be applied to promotions," according to Maj. Jim Eldredge, spokesman for the Human Resources Command.

"That means a 200-point limit for correspondence courses," he said.

To receive promotion points, course completion, along with credits earned, must be reflected in a soldier's Army Training Requirements and Reservation System training record.

ATRRS is the online system that the Army uses to manage resident and non-resident training programs.

Eldredge said any changes to the way correspondence courses are administered "is a Training and Doctrine Command issue."

"At our level (Human Resources Command), we accept the verified points and apply them to the promotion equation," he said.

Initially, correspondence courses were delivered in paper document format through the mail, but they now are delivered via compact discs and the Internet.

Sources said transition to the Internet not only streamlined the system, but increased its popularity as soldiers saw it as a fast and relatively easy way to increase their chances for promotion.

One senior NCO confirmed that the Army is working on a redesign of the semi-centralized system for sergeant and staff sergeant promotions, and that changes probably will be made to the military education section of the worksheet.

While specific details are not available, it is believed a revised system could be fielded next year as the Army transitions to Defense Integrated Military Human Resources System, or DIMHRS, a joint-service system for managing personnel and pay actions in the active and reserve components.

Major goals of the promotion redesign are believed to be a standardization of point computations among the active and reserve components, and a greater emphasis on soldiering and job skills.

Also, soldiers would be awarded points for experience gained in a combat zone; their job performance will be evaluated against measurable Army standards, while the system will impose greater discipline in the awarding of points for military education. □

EDITORIALS

Cheaters sometimes win

The Army's response to public revelations of widespread cheating on NCO promotions has been underwhelming.

A tip to a Web site called Shamschool.com revealed that soldiers can get answers to correspondence-course tests. Passing those courses can earn soldiers points on their promotion-point worksheets.

The Fort Campbell soldier behind the Web site was not punished. He was given a letter of counseling and ordered to remove the test answers, with threats of punishment if he failed to do so; he complied.

The case, first reported by The Boston Globe, publicly reveals what is an open secret in the Army: The system for promoting soldiers to sergeant and staff sergeant is wide open to cheating.

Shamschool.com claimed 10,000 members, and even after the answers were removed, a visitor could easily find instances of soldiers seeking help with correspondence courses. There are numerous other Web sites that also offer Army correspondence courses and test answers. Soldiers told Army Times that cheating is rampant — and all but institutionalized.

Yet the Army is doing little as an institution to stop it. The effort, by all accounts, is piecemeal, with officials addressing individual cases as they pop up — and with a surprisingly soft touch.

They concede they have been hard-pressed to stay ahead of the problem as the rapid expansion and popularity of the Internet has created a new universe of opportunity for cheaters, one in which the wrongdoers can operate remotely and anonymously.

The Army is looking at everything from randomizing test questions to administering proctored exams, but has yet to develop a comprehensive plan to kill the open opportunity to cheat through the correspondence-course section. Meanwhile, soldiers who played by the rules get outscored by those who cheated.

That's unacceptable, and Army leadership is complicit until it takes meaningful steps to end it. The Marine Corps faced a similar problem last year and attacked it by instituting changes demanded by the top down.

It's time for the Army to take similar action.